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Washington Writer Cites Role In Unmasking British Spy

By Joe Ritchie
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Michael Straight, a Washington-area writer, a former editor of the New Republic and former deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Arts, said yesterday he was the man who exposed eminent British art historian Anthony Blunt as a Soviet spy.

His revelation comes amid a series of charges published this week implicating leading British intelligence figures during World War II in yet another spy scandal.

Straight said Blunt — the queen's longtime personal art curator who was stripped of his knighthood after Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher revealed his past as a spy in a statement to Parliament in November 1979 — tried to recruit him as an agent at Cambridge University in 1937.

Straight said he revealed his knowledge about Blunt to then-attorney general Robert Kennedy in 1963 after he learned that the president planned to name him to the newly formed Endowment for the Arts.

"I had ruled myself out for the job" because of what was likely to be learned from government security checks, Straight said, although he emphasized that he flatly rejected Blunt's attempt to recruit him.

The FBI, Straight said, gave details of the recruitment attempt to British security officials, who ultimately successfully confronted Blunt with his treason. Blunt, in exchange for immunity from prosecution, confessed his role as a talent spotter for the Soviets at Cambridge, his passing of secrets to the Soviets while working for British intelligence during World War II, and his help in the escape from Britain to Moscow of fellow spies Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean.

Allegations in Britain's current spy scandal have made headlines in London all week, as the Daily Mail has been serializing a book by its defense specialist, Chapman Pincher. The latest allegation, published today in London, is that Britain's third-ranked spy at the end of World War II, Charles Howard Ellis, cooperated with Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union for 30 years.

Pincher's report Monday that there were strong suspicions that the late Sir Roger Hollis, former chief of Britain's MI5 counterintelligence service, was a Soviet spy, prompted demands in Parliament for a government inquiry and a scheduled appearance in the House of Commons today by Thatcher to reply to the allegations. The prime minister reportedly summoned top security officials yesterday to discuss the charges.

According to news service reports of the Daily Mail articles, Pincher charged that Ellis made an "abject confession" in 1965 of spying for Germany up to 1940, and admitted to handing over detailed charts of British intelligence, knowing they would go both to Germany and the Soviet Union.

According to The Associated Press, the Daily Mail said Ellis did not admit to spying for Germany after 1940 or for the Soviets following the war, but said his interrogators believed he acted as an agent for the Nazis before and during the war and later for the Soviet Union.

Ellis, a former Oxford University student born in Australia, allegedly was recruited for the Nazis by a relative and later decided to work for the Soviets purely for the money, the newspaper said.

Straight said he met Blunt in a group of student intellectuals at Cambridge who opposed the growing international fascist movement. He said the group was typical of many student action groups at the time in that they tended to be led by the extreme left.

"These organizations were not formally called communist organizations, but there were three elements in them: outsiders like myself who were drawn into the circle because of a desire to do something about Germany, about Japan and about Italy," Straight said.

Straight said that the Soviet Union apparently had decided to use these leftist-led groups as a recruiting ground for agents, usually without the knowledge of the leftists themselves. He said he was approached by Blunt after his best friend, a leftist student, died tragically at the age of 21.

"They said they had decided to accelerate their timetable" in a plan to recruit him as an agent, "because of the death of my closest friend," Straight said. He said he was "stunned and shocked" and said no.

Straight said the agents' plan was to have him return after his studies to the United States and work for the J.P. Morgan company, writing economic appraisals. His father, the well-known diplomat Willard Straight, was connected with the Morgan firm.